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SUBJECT: NOTES FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL: CUCUTA

REF: BOGOTA 1975

Classified By: DCM Milton K. Drucker, Reasons: 1.4 B & D.

¶1. (C) Summary: Voters in Cucuta, Colombia's fifth largest city and focal point for trade with Venezuela, are calling for job creation, road and infrastructure spending, and better access to health care. A leading Senate candidate, by all accounts, is far outspending rivals and is rumored to have ties to the AUC. In House races, the main battle is between the Conservatives and the U Party, both pro-Uribe national forces. The Liberal Party could pull off one of five House seats for the Department. This cable, along with reftel and septel, provides a pre-electoral view from major cities outside Bogota. Septel details Colombia-Venezuela border and military issues from the Cucuta perspective. End Summary.

#### GEOGRAPHY, ECONOMY, AND ELECTORAL STAKES

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¶2. (U) Poloff visited Cucuta, capital of Norte de Santander Department, March 1-4 in order to view the electoral environment in advance of March 12 Congressional elections. While Cucuta city is a bastion of the Liberal Party (PLC), the Department's smaller cities have traditionally supported the Conservatives (PCC). A dynamic center of commerce with Venezuela, Cucuta's economy is service-oriented as a result of large trade flows through the city. Outlying areas of the Department depend on agriculture and mineral resources, with major production of African palm and rice, and nascent coal extraction. Governor Luis Miguel Morelli told poloff that the Catatumbo region's coal reserves are the largest in Colombia, but are largely unexploited, owing to presence of illegal armed groups (IAGs) and lack of road and/or rail connections. The Department will elect five members of the House. Several leading Cucuta political figures are vying for seats in the Senate (Senators are chosen nationally, however).

#### A VIEW FROM THE CANDIDATES

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¶3. (C) In meetings with poloff, Congressional candidates were nearly universal in pointing to three key issues: job creation, road improvements and infrastructure investment, and access to health care. All felt that greater exploitation of the Department's fertile agriculture was the key on the job creation front. On roads, interlocutors noted that tractor trailers required some 15 hours to reach Bogota, and a similar or longer trek to Colombia's Atlantic Coast

ports. Health care had become more of an issue as the GOV was beginning to offer cataract surgery in Venezuela or Cuba for lower-income Colombians.

¶4. (C) Candidates praised the GOC for attention to the physical security of individuals on the campaign trail. All felt relatively free (of course with the usual personal security measures, including GOC-provided bodyguards and armored vehicles) to travel around the Department, with the exception of the traditionally conflictive Catatumbo region. National Police (CNP) deputy commander Col. William Moctezuma informed poloff that the Army and CNP would be able to protect 360 of 365 proposed polling stations in the Department. The other five, in the northern Catatumbo area, were likely to be scrapped owing to security concerns. (Note: The five stations would cover a potential voter universe of 1300 out of 850,000 voting age adults; voters in those areas would have to cast ballots elsewhere. End Note.)

#### CONCERN OVER BIG SPENDER

¶5. (C) Relative political newcomer and self-made businessman Carlos Barriga Penaranda was a constant mention by candidates of the major political parties, owing to Barriga's "excessive" campaign spending and rapid positioning as the potential top Senate voter getter from the Cucuta area. Candidates from the other parties indicated that Barriga was outspending his nearest competitor by a factor of three to one (and likely breaking the individual spending limit). Virtually all interlocutors noted Barriga counts on the tacit support of Cucuta Mayor Ramiro Suarez Corzo, who was arrested by the Prosecutor General's office in 2004 on suspicion of ties to paramilitaries. (Note: Suarez was released based on lack of evidence after seven months of house arrest. End Note.) Barriga is running under the "Citizen Convergence" (Convergencia Ciudadana, or CC) banner. National political commentators refer to the party as openly sympathetic to the AUC.

#### LIKELY ELECTORAL RESULT

¶6. (C) By most accounts, the PCC and U parties were fighting for two each (four total) of the Department's five House seats. The PLC hopes to take one seat. The likely PCC, U, and PLC winners are all either current House members or Senators. While newcomers are among each party's candidates, none will likely make the cut. Were the PLC to fall short, the PCC would likely pick up a third seat. "Hometown" Senate candidates Barriga, Juan Fernando Cristo (PLC), Manuel Guillermo Mora (U), and Juan Manuel Corzo (PCC) were all mentioned as near certain winners. Cristo and Corzo are currently Senators and Mora was mayor of Cucuta from 2001-2003.

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